

Statement of the Honorable Gus M. Bilirakis  
House Committee on Veterans Affairs

November 19, 2014

Chairman Benishek, Ranking Member Brownley and members of the Health Subcommittee,

Thank you for holding this very important hearing and for providing me an opportunity to testify on my bill and discuss the importance of exploring complementary alternative treatments for Veterans affected with mental health concerns.

As we all know, the costs of wars and the price for freedom are paid for through the valor of brave men and women. These individuals selflessly put themselves in harm's way so that we may enjoy the freedoms of our democracy. With statistics showing that one in five Veterans who served in Iraq and Afghanistan have been diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress, we must responsibly ask ourselves – are we doing enough when it comes to addressing mental health in our Veteran population?

Recent data has shown that every day in this country – an estimated 22 Veterans take their own lives. It is unconscionable that more casualties have occurred with our servicemembers here domestically upon their return from active duty as opposed to overseas while serving their country. Many of these tragic suicides are the result of depression, homelessness and a lack of available resources to assist in their transition into civilian life. My bill, H.R. 4977, the Creating Options for Veterans Expedited Recovery Act (COVER) will help remedy this tragic problem and provide additional therapies to our nation's wounded heroes.

The COVER Act will establish a commission to examine the Department of Veterans Affairs current evidence-based therapy treatment model for treating mental illnesses among veterans. Additionally, it will analyze the potential benefits of incorporating complementary alternative treatments available within our communities.

The duties of the commission designated under the COVER Act include conducting a patient-centered survey within each Veterans Integrated Service Network. The survey will examine several different factors related to the preferences and experiences of Veterans with regard to their interactions with the Department of Veterans Affairs. Instead of presuming to know what is best for Veterans, we should simply ask them and work with them on finding the right solutions that best fits their unique needs.

The scope of the survey will include: the experience of a Veteran when seeking medical assistance with the Department of Veterans' Affairs; the experience of Veterans with non-VA medical facilities and health professionals for treating mental health illnesses; the preferences of a Veteran on available treatments for mental health and which they believe to be most effective; the prevalence of prescribing prescription drugs within the VA as remedies for treating mental health illnesses; and outreach efforts by the VA Secretary on available benefits and treatments.

Additionally, the commission will be tasked with examining the available research on complementary alternative treatments for mental health and identify what benefits could be attained with the inclusion of such treatments for our Veterans seeking care at the VA. Some of these alternative therapies include, among others: accelerated resolution therapy, caring and training service dogs, music therapy, yoga, acupuncture therapy, meditation, and outdoor sports therapy. Finally, the commission will study the potential increase in benefit claims for mental health issues for Veterans returning from Operation Iraqi Freedom, Operation Enduring Freedom, and Operation New Dawn. We must ensure that the VA is prepared with the necessary resources and infrastructure to handle the increase in those utilizing their earned benefits to address the mental and physical ailments incurred from military service.

Once the Commission has successfully completed their duties, a final report will be issued and made available outlining its recommendations and findings based on their analysis of the patient-centered survey, alternative treatments and evidence-based therapies. The Commission will also be responsible for creating a plan to implement those findings in a feasible, timely, and cost effective manner.

I am happy to have the support of the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, the American Legion, and VetsFirst. With the collaboration of our nation's greatest heroes, Congress, and the VA, we can increase access to quality care for Veterans across the country and help better meet their needs when seeking the care they need.

Thank you for allowing me to testify on behalf of the COVER Act today and I urge all of my colleagues to support this important piece of legislation and show our Veterans with action, and not just promises, that we have them "covered."